

Was Bombing Worth It?

The Question Is Critical, Its Answer Elusive

Last of Five Articles

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SAIGON—The critical questions growing out of the air war in South-east Asia remain to be answered: What did the bombing accomplish? How instrumental was it in moving Hanoi to-

The Air War—V

ward a settlement? And, above all, was it worth the tremendous cost in Vietnamese and American lives, resources and money?

Whether those questions ever can be answered accurately is doubtful. But there is a great deal at stake in trying to deal with them objectively.

At this point, no one but the North Vietnamese leadership knows precisely how bad the country, its people, its

economy and military forces were hurt by the bombing. Only they know precisely how important that factor was in leading them toward a settlement in comparison to other diplomatic, political and military factors.

Unlike World War II, there will be no teams of Americans going into the North to interview the people, inspect the damage and to produce a post-war strategic bombing survey (the findings of the World War II survey of Germany are still being debated).

Because Hanoi appeared most anxious to negotiate on the heels of an extensive eight-month bombing campaign against its heartland, and after virtually all the half-million U.S. ground troops had gone home, there will be a temptation in some quarters to say that air power won the war.

Yet, if a cease-fire comes, a political map of South Vietnam will look much the same as it did five years ago in terms of areas truly under Saigon's control. So others will argue that dropping so many bombs didn't change things enough to warrant the price.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

It is hard to find anyone in South Vietnam—American or South Vietnamese—who believes that Hanoi's 15-division assault against Saigon's forces in April could have been stopped without heavy use of American airpower.

But it is easy to find many civilian officials here who believe that much of the bombing throughout Indochina has always been excessive, principally that aimed at halting the flow of supplies—which accounts for most of the bombs—as distinct from that done over the battlefield.

"Certainly this war has not been one of intelligence," says one top South Vietnamese government official. "It was run by the generals, and any war run

by the generals will be excessive in military terms. But certainly it has helped to eliminate our enemies. When too many bombs drop, some extra (enemy) soldiers will be killed and that helps."

The problem in trying to assess the bombing campaign, as many observers see it, is that the whole subject is vulnerable to sloganeering by hawks and doves alike.

Accepting the contention that air power won the war, when other factors may have been more important, could lead to higher defense budgets based on overblown strategies, or to acquiescence in the idea that there is a "clean" way to fight from the air without fighting on the ground.

On the other hand, the air war—at least in some areas—was carried out more effectively in recent months than many critics thought possible; its role should not be dismissed.

It may be, as one congressional aide says: "There are enough statistics around to prove anything you want about this war. It will be hard for Congress to come to grips with it . . . to have any effect on the future course of things."

A U.S. embassy official with long experience in Vietnam cautions, however, that "before you even try and answer the question of why it ended . . . and where the bombing fits in . . . you have got to ask: Did it end? It is one thing to explain a change in tactics (by North Vietnam) and another to explain a change in objectives, and I'm not sure I know what it is that Hanoi expects to do in the future."

A senior U.S. Army commander here expands upon that same point: "You could argue that Gen. Giap (the North Vietnamese commander) can still look down on this country (South Vietnam) right now and, in spite of the fact that his armies are defeated and his units demoralized and he can't even communicate with some of them, he still sees the seeds of corruption and self-defeat here and can convince himself that this is far from a lost cause."

Three kinds of air war have been carried out against North Vietnam: one against the North itself—its military and supply facilities, transportation, power and fuel systems, and whatever supporting industry it had; a second against North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops and supplies in South Vietnam; and a third that spilled over heavily at times into Laos and Cambodia against supply trails, base camps and storage areas.

With Hanoi's frame of mind left to guesswork, interviews with dozens of U.S. and Vietnamese military and civilian specialists both in and out of government over the past two months

Since the Communists' April offensive began, almost a half-million tons

of bombs have been dropped on North Vietnam.

The bombing represented a convenient marriage of objectives between the military, who believed an intensive air effort and mining campaign could choke off virtually all of Hanoi's military supplies, and the White House, which wanted to send Hanoi an unmistakable political signal that the North would not remain a sanctuary while the South was under attack.

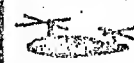
The mining of North Vietnam's harbors on May 8, just weeks before the scheduled U.S.-Soviet summit meeting, was another part of the signal.

In interviews during September, before any breakthrough had come in the peace talks, White House officials at

U.S. AIRLOSSES: 1965-72



Pilots, Crewmen & Others
Killed in Flight—2935
Through Sept. '72



Helicopters—4847
Through Nov. '72



Fixed wing planes—1692
Through Nov. '72

high levels explained privately "the resumption of the bombing and the mining prior to the summit meeting were major political factors in trying to achieve a process that has been under way for some time . . . to try and isolate Hanoi from its rear areas in Russia and China."

Officials indicated that President Nixon personally did not believe the bombing and mining would be militarily decisive, nor was he getting that kind of advice from the CIA, the civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense or from Henry A. Kissinger.

The idea was to parlay growing Soviet-Chinese military fears of each other, China's unwillingness to see a North Vietnam backed by the Soviet Union as the predominant force in Southeast Asia, and Russia's shifting interests in a better relationship with the United States into a clear signal to Hanoi that it could not succeed.

By mid-summer and into the fall, the bombing and mining had apparently carried other political signals to Hanoi. For one thing, the summit had been held despite the entrapment of Soviet ships in North Vietnamese harbors, and the Soviets had apparently decided they were either unwilling or unable to break the mine blockade.

The bombing had not caused any major protest movement in the United States, which may have indicated to Hanoi that the last traces of the hesi-